Visual Presence and Embodiment in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Chinese Portraiture

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Seventeenth and eighteenth century Chinese portraiture persistently displays a peculiar stylistic disjunction between the visage and the rest of the composition. These images typically feature densely-modeled and frontal faces placed amid planar compositions that consist largely of patterns of legible brushstrokes. The unprecedented visual convincingness these likenesses exhibit has frequently been pronounced as the finest achievements of realism in Ming-Qing painting, but once one shifts the focus of attention from the gripping force of facial presence to the overall visual impression produced by the entire composition, one cannot but be struck by their awkward instability. Uncomfortably contained in a pictorial space to which it hardly belongs, the veristic face appears to bulge out of the flat surface to directly impinge upon the beholder's eyes. And arguably, it is this ocular effect, more than the "photographic" likeness of facial depiction per se,[1] that confers the painted faces a certain intensity of presence some have-misleadingly to my mind-labeled "realistic."

How is it that such an unstable composition pervaded an entire pictorial genre for over two centuries? What kind of visuality was articulated in this stylistic oddity which may appear to us little more than an optical trick? To reconstruct the significance of this ocular experience for the painters and beholders of the seventeenth and eighteenth century is a much less straightforward business than it may first appear. Precisely because - as I hope to show - it was an essential ingredient of a *specifically ocular* experience of presence, a simple iconography that expects contemporary texts to provide direct, uncomplicated verbal accounts to visual forms will inevitably fail to serve the analytic task at hand. It was indeed only in the nineteenth century that the very fact of disjunction began to be noticed in critical texts

1 A simple experiment reveals how un-photographic these likenesses in fact are. Mask everything around the face to isolate it from its surrounding. The face in isolation looks considerably more two-dimentional and picture-like, its symmetry more apparent. This is in sharp contrast to late nineteenth century portraits that were directly copied from photographs of the sitters; in them, the asymmetry of human physiognomy is copiously transposed on the pictorial plane and the play of light and shadow on the physical surface of the face more carefully attended to. On the interaction of photography and portraiture in the nineteenth century see (Stuart, 1997).

at all, and this discursive coming-to-terms went hand in hand with a conventionalization of the face/rest ratio in the paintings. Until the early nineteenth century, when stylistic disjunction became an explicit element of pictorial idiom and hence came to constitute the object of artists' conscious manipulation, the effect of face/rest disjunction remained, relatively speaking, more understated and varied. And corresponding to this diffuseness of the phenomenon, the contemporary texts registered its impact not so much in formal descriptions as in subtle modulations of the language conveying the sensations of presence elicited in the beholding gaze.

In this essay, I hope to delineate the outlines of a new form of visuality that informed this diffuse corpus, a visuality tacitly enacted in the images and obliquely figured in the concomitant texts. The engaging instability of the disjunctive images anchors pictorial convincingness from the picture's claim over an autonomous capacity to signify (however this may be realized) to the sensation of interaction between image and beholder. A *contingent* time regulating such a visuality becomes part and parcel of the experience that a picture is not a *mere* picture. The ubiquity of the disjunctive style in seventeenth and eighteenth century portraiture seemingly testifies to such a transition in the conception of pictorial presence. Yet by the same token, this new visuality was not to congeal into a stable program of visual certainty such as the notion of realism would intimate. Instead, the intense experience of presence that these images elicited - a sensation of presence formulated by some contemporary authors in the language of real *encounter* - was precariously juxtaposed to the elusiveness of mental vision and the illusoriness of apparition. In its ontological precariousness, the disjunctive style of portrayal served to articulate a set of problematics that shaped much of the seventeenth and eighteenth century regimes of pictorial images: the relationship between seeing and identifying, interiority and exteriority, presence and absence, or the relationship between reality and artifice. The fluidity of significance that obtained to the disjunctive portraits is what I ultimately hope to map out in this essay.

To begin with, let us pose our eyes on a portrait of the Chan monk Yushi heshang, attributed to the seventeenth century portraitist Shen Shao (figure 1). The tremulous parallel-lines tracing the folds of the drapery are, appropriately to the subject matter, strikingly reminiscent of the paintings of monks and Buddhist deities by the late Ming painter Wu Bin.[2] The force of Wu Bin's archaistic style lies in the flat decorative lines that appear to draw from the pictorial vocabulary of contemporary wood-block print illustration. And this two-dimensionality of the pictor-

2 Cf. Wu Bin. Late 1610s. The Five Bhikshus . Leaf from the album *Twenty-Five Buddhist Deities of the Surangama Sutra*. Palace Museum, Taibei. Reproduced in Fong, Wen, and James C.Y. Watt, eds. *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996, pl. 208.

Figure 1

ial space, in conjunction with the humorous and somewhat placid countenances of the figures, appears to form a quirky metaphor for spiritual communion.[3] This much applies to Shen Shao's portrait as well, except for the face, which appears to bulge out of the flat print-like surface, as if to counterpoise the introvert wit of Wu Bin's figures. The mysteriously impenetrable countenance of the Buddhist figures is here substituted with another impenetrability, this time material and tangible, refusing to commune with the enigmatic spirit conjured up by the tremulous garment-folds that bear the painter's unmistakable stylistic signature. The introduction of a mirror-like verisimilitude in the pictorial space otherwise signaling a profound affinity with a contemporary painterly style opens up multiple planes of oppositions: two- vs. three dimensional, the painterly vs. the real, the internal vs. the external, etc. In these oppositions that undercut, but also intensify one another, the image endows the face with a strange visual efficacy through a conjugation of presence and displacement.

Within the discursive economy of Chinese aesthetics, the multiple planes condensed in this protean opposition between the face and the rest can be safely subsumed under the conceptual polarity between *xing* and shen. In its widest acceptance, the conceptual dyad may be characterized as follows: *xing* refers to things, events and bodies as observed from outside - that is, without sharing the experience that activates these animate and inanimate bodies; shen on the other hand refers to these phenomena and bodies as seen from inside - that is, in terms of an internal

3 (Fong and Watt 1996: 408)

Figure 2

experience whose unity constitutes what we may call 'character', 'personality', or 'affect'. In view of this terminological scheme, the combination of two-dimensionality, largely empty background, print-like brushstrokes and their stylistic allusions in Shen Shao's picture constructs a domain of shen, the interiority of which is attributable to either the sitter, the painter, the communion between the two, or, by extension, the communion between the sitter and the beholder. Such an equation of the pictorial space with an essentially *internal* space is in keeping with the general characteristic of Chinese portraiture that tended to represent the sitter *inside out*: the internal features of the sitter were externalized in the paraphernalia populating the pictorial space, the figure functioning essentially as nothing but an anchor for the meaning and mood articulated beyond the contour lines delimiting the figure.[4]

The tangible opacity of the visage in Shen Shao's picture, on the other hand, foregrounds the *xing* pole. This effect is achieved by the introduction of a third dimension (figure 2). The sense of *volume* is rendered in a technique that suggests an intimate connection with European images introduced by Jesuit missionaries. This selective appropriation of European technique in portraiture is usually associated with the great early seventeenth century portraitist Zeng Jing, who initiated

4 On the centrality of the setting in Chinese figure painting, see (Goldberg, 1998).

the 'disjunctive style' of portraiture. Shen Shao also belonged to what came to be collectively designated as the 'Zeng Jing School' of portraiture, a school that dominated the genre for the next two centuries. If pre-sixteenth century Chinese painting could be generally characterized as the art of two-dimensional textures and patterns, the introduction of volume, at least partially via the appropriation of European pictorial elements, was an event whose magnitude and ramification art historians are just beginning to gauge. However, what we are seeing here is not a simple reproduction of the pictorial norm of realism. Instead, what these images reproduce, if anything, is the visual impact that European 'realistic' images would have produced against the background of Ming-Qing visual culture.[5] In the context of Shen Shao's portrait, the third dimension built into the visage destabilizes the topological relationship of the visage vis-à-vis the pictorial space in fundamental ways, since this third dimension cannot be contained within the stubbornly two-dimensional interiority of the latter.

The nature of Zeng Jing's indebtedness to images of European provenance is a matter of some contention. Be that as it may, the innovative nature of Zeng Jing's technique clearly drew the attention of contemporary beholders. Jiang Shaoshu, who compiled the important collection of Ming painters' biographies *Wusheng shishi*, noted that Zeng Jing would add as many as several dozens of layers of color wash to depict the sitter's face.[6] Extant works by Zeng do not necessarily substantiate Jiang's claim, instead featuring relatively lightly painted faces through which faintly transpires the underlying ink sketch. But Jiang Shaoshu's hyperbolic expression evidences the significance that contemporaries attached to the technique of wash-layering. Its pictorial importance lay in *effacing the traces of the brush*. Chinese painting was generally characterized by a strict system of brush-mode that drew its idiom largely from calligraphy. As is observable in Zeng Jing's rendering of garment fold, brushstrokes as proper pictorial elements were to embody the linearity and clear demarcation of beginning, middle, and end that also defined the calligraphic brushstroke.[7] In contrast, the visage in Zeng's painting does not feature such 'strokes'; the layers of wash mask the linearity of the underlying sketch, which appears less as lines than as shades articulating the three-dimensional surface of the visage. It is this erasure of linearity that elicits the impression that a *depicted* face is

4 On the centrality of the setting in Chinese figure painting, see (Goldberg, 1998).

5 *Wusheng shishi* describes the visual effects of both Zeng Jing's paintings and images of European provenance in largely overlapping terms (Jiang 1963: 72/283). James Cahill has been instrumental in bringing the impact of European images on late Ming and Qing visual culture to art historians' attention (Cahill 1982).

6 (Jiang 1963: 72/222)

7 Zhou Lüjing argued in his treatise on painting, *Tianxing daomao*, that garment folds should be drawn according to a particular calligraphic style. On the particular cache of brush-style in Ming-Qing figure painting's rendering of garment fold, see (Nishigami 1991).

peering out of an essentially *written* pictorial space.

The disjunctive contrast between 'depicted' surface and 'written' line may be characterized as a pictorial version of what Francois Lyotard called the *differend*, drawing on a legal term that designates the indefinite state of feud between two parties that cannot agree on the terms of agreement.[8] In order for two distinct systems of meaning to enter into relationship, a meta-system is called for to legislate the terms of the relationship. If one of the two concerned systems attempts to function as such a meta-system, and the other rejects this claim for a 'meta-' status, the relationship fails to occur, and the two systems enter the unstable state of the *differend*. The *differend* thus constructs the two-party relationship as fundamentally contingent, since there is no consent on how to establish relationship. Accordingly, the pictorial *differend* presents the face, represented in its *xing*-ness, through its contingent modality vis-à-vis the pictorial space.

This contingency of the face, or *xing*, in portraiture was the crux of the complex issues of proper xing/shen ratio that Shen Zongqian's *Jiezhou's Treatise on the Art of Painting* (*Jiezhou xuehuabian*), the single most important treatise on portraiture in the latter half of the eighteenth century, grappled with throughout its exceptionally articulate trail of arguments.[9] The opening section of *Jiezhou's* Treatise maps out the precarious topology of *xing/shen* dialectics in a manner that highlights the ambiguous status of *xing*. Here the two terms of *xing* and *shen* bear meanings far more specific than I have summarized above: *xing* designates facial appearance, and *shen* refers to what is intrinsically particular to the person, an entity or force that identifies him or her. The passage begins by positing, somewhat tautologically, that *xing* - that is, the human visage - may resemble each other, and may also transform over time, but the *shen* of a person is absolutely unique and permanent. Hence minor flaws in physiognomic portrayal are negligible so long as the portraitist captures the *shen* of the sitter. But in a perplexing move, the ensuing passage turns around the point he just made to state that *shen* in portraiture cannot be captured apart from facial appearance; Only if facial likeness is perfectly captured, will *shen* 'arrive' (*lai*) -- that is, will it emerge on its own accord.

Through this winding discursive trail, *xing/shen* emerges as a fundamentally *contingent* relationship. Here I understand 'contingency' in two senses of the term. First, in the sense that *xing* is contingent vis-à-vis *shen; xing* is inessential, and, moreover, it potentially blurs the boundary of identities by nesting the image within a web of physical resemblance. Second, in the sense that *shen* is contingent *upon xing; xing* is the irreducible precondition for *shen* to emerge within the picture. This

8 (Lyotard 1983)
9 (Shen 1962: 1-2)

insertion of *xing* in portraiture's production of meaning defers the advent of *shen* even as it operates as the indispensable catalyst for the entire process of conveying *shen*.

If the *xing/shen* opposition was in fact what Zeng Jing and Shen Shao among many others constructed in their versions of pictorial disjunction, the next image further highlights the *systemic* nature of this disjunction. The collaborative painting by the portraitist Wu Xingzeng and the landscapist Dong Bangda brings forth a state of *differend* not only between two styles but also between two entire pictorial systems. The landscape, executed in a typical brushwork-heavy Qing Orthodox style, is a good representation of the pictorial system of *xieyi* ('idea-sketching'). One of the distinctive features of the system of *xieyi* is that in it, the fundamental structure for visual representation that the Gestalt psychologists would call figure/ground becomes highly unstable. In a *xieyi* painting, all 'figures' are equally legible in terms of the brushstrokes, and the brushstroke's gradation of tonality communicate with the 'ground' (that is, the void around the figures and the strokes). This has the effect of shifting the significance of the 'ground' from a mute condition of possibility for the figure to emerge to a state of potentiality of meaning - what the art historian John Hay called a pictorial 'negentropy.'' The possibility of free oscillation between figural representation and calligraphic articulation that such a pictorial system enables structures the pictorial surface in such a way that every infinitesimal detail is potentially significant. The system of *xieyi* constitutes the pictorial surface as a space of what the Chinese critics often called 'brush-idea' (*biyi*): the plethora of signifiers constituting such a space - the minute turns of the brush, the obscure gestures of homage to ancient masters cued by composition and strokes, the gradation of full and void, etc. - all have *yi* as their sole master signified, the ideational substance arising from the painter's communion with the landscape.

Such a conception of pictorial space was not restricted to landscape, since it was precisely in such terms that the twelfth and thirteenth century authors Su Shi and Chen Zao discussed the art of portraiture.[10] To produce a mirror-like replica of the sitter's outward appearance was beside the point for these authors. Instead they argued that portrait painters should observe the sitter's daily demeanors from an invisible corner to capture the sitter's moments of elation (*yincha*). Once he had accumulated a stock of impressions in his mind, the painter was to ruminate over them until he grasped the essence of the subject (*moshi*). Thus filtered through the painter's mind, the impressions were stripped of their contingent details to leave the bare ideational core (*si*), which was then committed to the brush.

If the pictorial space of portraiture was, similarly to landscape, defined as a

10 (Yu 1973: 454, 471)

space of interiority and ideation by the classical theorists of the genre, the introduction of a mirrorlike visage in Wu Xingzeng's picture fundamentally refigures the character of the pictorial space by violently reducing the landscape to a *ground* against which the face asserts its obstinate presence as *figure*. Such an intensification of the figural is doubly effectuated in Wu and Dong's image, in relation to both the representational and calligraphic order of the landscape. The depth of representational space in Dong Bangda's landscape is structured by two lines of recession, one of them run from the large tree looming on the left edge, via the middle-ground tree, and ending at the boulder on the right edge; the other one goes from the lower right corner to the open space behind the figure. But this carefully structured spatial composition is irritated by the excess of figural presence around which depth seems to collapse. Consequently, the figure strikes one as not properly belonging to the slot of space it is allotted to. It appears as if a thin opaque film were pasted onto the pictorial surface. Thus, the figure assumes a ghostly visual modality of *absent presence* - a visual presence that is paradoxically absent from the place it occupies.

To understand the nature of 'irritation' that the presence of the visage triggers vis-à-vis the calligraphic order of the landscape, we may want to draw on Jean-François Billeter's penetrating analysis of calligraphy as the projection of what he called, in a phenomenological parlance, the 'body proper'.[11] The body proper is, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of *shen*, the internal confluence of activities that form our embodied experience. The calligraphic traces register this body proper and its various mutations as the calligrapher engages in the act of writing. To behold a piece of calligraphy, then, is tantamount to reactivating the body proper that informs the calligraphic act in the beholding body through a process that may be called *internal mimesis*.

The mirrorlike face in the disjunctive portrait juxtaposes a radically different order of mimesis to such a calligraphic space; it is a visual mimesis that sees the body as object. The traces of the brush depicting physiognomic features no longer cue internal mimesis but instead present themselves as subordinated to real entities. They are the 'brushwork of nature' (*tianran bifa*), as *Jiezhou's Treatise* put it so aptly. It is as if the artifice of calligraphic signification gave way to a natural potential of signification that the face intensely embodies.

The human visage thus incarnates two modalities in which *xing* extracts itself from the pictorial space: first in its exteriority, its objecthood, and second, in that it possesses in itself a potency of meaning production that does not depend on the painter's mental filtering as the Song theorists had it. It appears that in the contemporary beholding experience, the disjunctive composition was intimately bound

11 (Billeter 1990: 168ff.)

up with a sensation of *movement*. Seventeenth and eighteenth century critics often discussed the experience of beholding these portraits in the language of movement *into, out of,* and *across* the pictorial space. For example, one commentary on the 'Zeng Jing School' stated: "Once the painter committed Zeng Jing's method to heart, his work had the effect of a bird crossing the beholder's field of vision: the faster xing passes by, the more completely shen is conveyed" (*ji qi ji de yu xin, ruo feiniao zhi guomu, qi xing zhi qu wo yu ji, er shen yu quan yi*).[12] The velocity evoked in this passage confines the optical presence of *xing* to the margin of vision, against the background of which the plenitude of *shen* is conveyed. One may perhaps say that the bird's fleeting *xing* can be seen, but cannot be looked at. While shading the beholding experience with a mood of presence, *xing* thus does not register in thematized vision. And in this sense, the expression articulates the visual effect of the disjunctive image: there, too, the *xing* of the face can be seen, but cannot be looked at *within* the pictorial space surrounding it. Even though the face is positioned at the center, the *xing* of the face constantly goes out of focus, and thus falls into marginal vision. Another critical cliché had it that "The figure looks as if it would come out of the picture if called upon" (*ke hu zhi yu chu*).[13] If, instead of taking such an apparently formulaic expression simply as an obligatory paean to verisimilitude, we regarded it as actually articulating the kinetic quality of the beholding experience, its parallels with the bulging-out effect of the disjunctive composition would become all the more evident. The temporality evoked in these examples is not so much the diegetic time inherent in the pictorial space - a time that is *read* from the content of the picture. Instead, it is the efficacious temporality that binds the image and the beholder and structures the actual scene of beholding.

Movement and sense of time indeed figured prominently in the informal portraits of the period, forming a veritable *iconography of the moment*. The motif of the moment was cued in a multitude of ways, but all of them figure the split second when the sitter as it were 'enter' the scene of beholding. Xu Zhang's portrait of Wu Jiayun captures the moment in which the sitter's attention is wrenched away from some activity in which he is absorbed (reading) to be directed toward the beholder. A collaborative work by Wang Xuehao and an anonymous portraitist breaks the moment further down into the split second of ambiguity provoked by the infinitesimally aslant gaze of the sitter. Is he looking at us, or is he absorbed in some mysteriously private thought keeping him away from recognizing us? In a manner reminiscent of the problematics the art historian Michael Fried called 'absorption and theatricality',[14] these images again and again capture the moment of the sitter's pas-

12 (Zhu : 41/340)

13 (Feng 1797=1985: 13/739)

sage from self-absorption to encounter. This passage simultaneously constitutes an entering of the figure into the scene of beholding, and consequently its coming out of the pictorial space.

Entering, exiting, crossing - these are all kinetic tropes for the figure's state of not-quite-inhabiting the pictorial space. It might have been in such kinetic dramatization of the beholding experience that the sense of the sitter's real presence was evoked, circumventing pictorial thematization so as to impinge directly upon the beholder's eyes. The face/rest disjunction, alongside other pictorial devices to produce movement, thus participates in a general mode of real presence?one in which the sensation of presence is inextricably imbricated with the experience of the beholding eye.

But the real presence of what? So far I have intimated that the focus of the sensation of reality was *xing*, i.e. the external, visible presence of the sitter's visage. While I believe that such was most often the case, a work like the one I am about to discuss may substantially complicate our understanding of the nature of presence involved here (figure 3). This pictorial allegory of beholding by the important portraitist of around 1700, Yu Zhiding, contrasts two ways of relating to images. But

Figure 3

14 (Fried 1980)

before commenting on this issue, I'd like to point out that the picture within the picture featured in this composition can be understood as a portrait of the sitter. As the art historian Wu Hung noted, the motif of pictures within pictures in Chinese painting often stood as the representation of the inner dispositions and aspirations of the human figure it accompanied.[15] In the case of this portrait of Qiao Lai, the blue-and-green color scheme shared between the picture within the picture here and the other portraits of the same sitter, with which the work under consideration forms a series, reinforce this general thematic connection. So this may safely be read as the portrait of Qiao Lai looking at his own portrait. In fact, 'looking' may not be the appropriate way to characterize the sitter's activity. More important than a purely visual connection here is the corporeal engagement that the leaning of the sitter's body intimates. This leaning of the body is echoed by the subtle bending forward of the hanging scroll, which appears to suggest a slight swinging movement. In the novels and dramas of the period, such a movement of the image was often taken as a sign of animation. So here we seem to witness a resonance between two bodies, the body of the sitter-cum-beholder and the body of the image, so to speak. The corporeality involved here is not that of xing per se, but rather the corporeality of *posture, an embodied sensation of absorption.*

Yu Zhiding frequently featured such sensations of the body in his works. We may notice similar motifs in the toes plunged in water,[16] in the bodily weight that we may feel in the leaning back of the sitter,[17] or the fingers lightly touching the line[18] or pushing up the sleeve.[19] These figures of bodily sensation construct an experience of reality on the part of the beholder very distinct from one predicated on the visual perception of external form. A much more immediate corporeal involvement appears to be at play here - a direct engagement of the beholding body with the inner sensations of the sitter.

In the portrait of Qiao Lai, such a corporeal engagement is counteracted by the gaze of the servant peeking in from behind the hanging scroll. The figure of the peeping servant was frequently featured in contemporary literature, usually standing for an external, debunking gaze sarcastically undermining the self-absorption of

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15 (Wu 1996: chapter 3)

16 Cf. Yu, Zhiding and Gu Songchao. 1680-82 or 90-94. *Portrait of Qiao Lai Washing His Feet in the River.* Nanjing Museum. Reproduced in *Mingjia Hanmo* vol. 3 (1990), p. 117.

17 Cf. Yu, Zhiding . 1705. *Portrait of Mou Sima.* Private Collection. Reproduced in *Mingjia Hanmo* vol. 3 (1990), p. 122. And Yu, Zhiding. 1676. *Portrait of Jiang Chenying.* Shanghai Museum. Reproduced in *Zhongguo gudai shuhua tumu Shanghai* 1-3321.

18 Cf. Yu, Zhiding. 1696. *Kao Shiqi Whiling Away the Summer* (Jiangcun Xiaoxia Tu). Nelson-Atkins Museum. Reproduced in Ho, Wai-kam, Sherman E. Lee, Laurence Sickman, and Marc F. Wilson. *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collections of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and the Cleveland Museum of Art.* Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980, fig. 258.

19 Cf. Yu, Zhiding. 1700. *Portrait of Wang Shizhen Supervising the Release of a Silver Pheasant.* Palace Museum, Beijing. Detail. Reproduced in *Yiyuan duoying* vol. 27 (1986), pp. 24-5.

their masters.[20] The refusal of engagement is evident in the very fact that the servant is not seeing and cannot see the picture on the scroll. The picture is a *thing* for the servant - a thing he in fact holds in his hands. In short, it is a *xing*.

Thus in this allegorical representation of the scene of beholding, the corporal, potentially anti-visual engagement of the sitter-cum-beholder is emphatically pitched against a gaze that is exclusively focused on *xing*. And in fact, in another painting, Yu Zhiding appears to have construed the peculiar visuality of the disjunctive composition in the same light. Yu Zhiding's portrait of Zhou Lianggong, the foremost collector and patron of the art of painting in the latter half of the seventeenth century, produces an unmistakable disjunctive effect through the contrast between the three-dimensionally modeled visage and the combination of the tremulous brushwork tracing the garment folds and the delicate two dimensional play of color and tonalities composing the background. Yet, the overall effect of the disjunction is somewhat different from the images considered so far: rather than singularly intensifying the visual presence of the visage, disjunction in this case appears to endow the face with something like a fluctuating luminosity.

A fascinating inscription by the sitter's nephew Zhou Min that accompanies the painting underscores such an impression. I quote the first few lines: "In this world, where can one find one's abode? However, form and yet not form, sound and yet not sound. It is just like Zen that is not Zen, and moral precepts that are not moral precepts. If so, where can one not find one's abode?" (*dadi zhi jian, hechu ke rong ci shen. ran xing er bu xing, sheng er bu sheng, you fu chan er bu chan, lu er bu lu ye. ze hechu buke rong ci shen ye.*)[21] The Buddhist overtone of the inscription is unmistakable. It refers to the notion of the ultimate 'emptiness' (*kong, sunyata*) of all phenomena. But instead of delving into its arcane metaphysics, I would like to call your attention to the expression 'form (*xing*) and yet not form.' This, to my mind, captures the peculiar visual modality of the visage in disjunctive portraits that I called 'absent presence' - a *xing* that is simultaneously there and not there, something like a faint mental image of form. And I understand the term 'image' here in its fundamental meaning: a thing that simultaneously is and is not something.

Now, the formula 'sound and yet not sound' that is juxtaposed to '*xing* and yet not *xing*' in the inscription identifies the core theme of the painting: the stringless lute. This peculiar motif evokes two interrelated themes in the Chinese conception of music. The first theme is that ultimate music is a music without external

20 (Owen 1997)

21 I would like to express my gratitude to Dora Ching of Princeton University for her assistance in transcribing this inscription.

realization (*wusheng zhi yue*), an idea that finds its locus classicus in the canonical text *The Book of Rite* (*liji*). The centrality of this theme of immaterial sound is underscored in the painting by the barely audible sound that the leaf on the left of the figure would have made on touching the ground, and the tremor of the garment fold visualizing the vibration of the inaudible sound. The next theme, which is also invoked in the inscription, is that of the perfect communion between performer and listener (*zhiyin*). This notion finds its most powerfully expressed in the famous story of the legendary lute player Bo Ya and his no less legendary listener Zhong Ziqi. Whatever mental imagery inspired Bo Ya's musical performance - an image of mountain or of water, for instance - Zhong Ziqi would immediately identify it.[22]

The stringless lute thus stands as the figure of an immediate empathy, a comprehension without residue between the sitter and the intended viewer. The strict homology that applies between this musical motif and the visual modality of the visage - the 'X and yet not X' structure that binds them - suggests that the latter also stands as a figure of interiority. The face no longer embodies the powerful presence of *xing* impinging upon the beholding eye. Instead, it is the oscillation of the visage between *xing* and not *xing*, presence and absence, that engages the beholder. I'd like to see this visual pulsation as another variant of the figures of corporeal identification that, as we noted above, recurred in this painter's oeuvre. The beholder empathizes with the sitter by embodying the visual pulsation between *xing* and not *xing*. And I take Zhou Min's inscription to provide a textual figure of such an experience of beholding: the rhythmic repetition of the 'X and yet not X' formula structuring the text appears to textually embody the visual rhythm of the visage and thus to perform the immediate comprehension that the content of the text identifies.

The disjunctive image thus operates like a visual chiasmus. While in some cases it foregrounds the visual presence of the body before the beholding eyes, the same effect can also be turned around to orchestrate a mimetic form of beholding. And from there it is only a step to a moment when, in a total chiasmic twist, the figure's visual modality of absent presence was experienced as the presence of the absent - that is, of apparition and phantasmagoria. We find the trace of one such moment in the epitaph the eighteenth century poet Yuan Mei dedicated to Wu Xingzeng.[23] After piling up metaphor after metaphor of praise over Wu Xingzeng's dexterity in producing strikingly veristic likenesses, Yuan Mei wrote "[Wu

22 The Liji phrase occurs in the Kongzi xianju chapter (Ruan : v. 5 29/3A). The zhiyin story comes down to us in numerous versions, of which the one in Liezi is best known (Yan and Yan 1986: 128). On these and related issues, see (Dewoskin 1983).

23 (Yuan 1993: 2/90)

Xingzeng] was also like the occult practitioner who would conjure up the dead to capture their body and soul" (*ru shewu zhaowang, zhuanshe hunpo*). The stark juxtaposition of utmost lifelikeness and ultimate loss in this brief passage is explosive, and signals a sense of reality that surpasses the proper order of representational faithfulness, instead overflowing into a phantasmagoric realm. The magical practice Yuan Mei alluded to is 'the summoning the dead to transcribe its likeness' (*zhaohun chuanshen*), which refers to an occult seance presided over by a specialist who would conjure up the image of the dead in a mirror and transcribe its likeness onto paper or silk.[24] Its eccentricity was regarded by contemporaries with an attitude of tongue-in-cheek curiosity, but due to the poignancy of the longing involved in the practice, it also provided the material for a number of literary excursions into the power of emotion and sentiment (*qing*) that bridges life and death. One might imagine that the portraits produced by these occult practitioners would resemble the deceased more closely than the conventional posthumous portraits, but it turns out that the morbid 'likenesses' captured in the mirror, after which the paintings were produced, were sometimes felt by the participants of the seance as somewhat blurry and outlandish, possibly not unlike the turn-of-the-century photographs of ectoplasmic apparitions.[25] The absent presence of the spectral image, its ceaseless eluding of our attempts to focus, its instability that insistently resound at the bottom of our visual field - all these supply us with a perfect figure for the visual modality of the face in our disjunctive portraits. If death is a figure for the pictorial absence of presence that conditioned many of the portrait images of the period, the *surreality* of

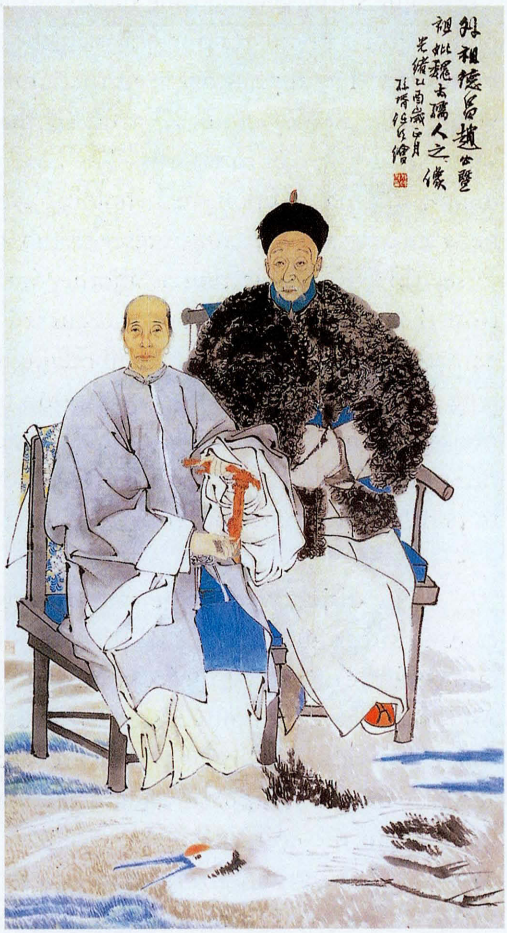

Figure 4

24 The practice is recorded in numerous 'casual note' literature (biji) of the period. See for example (Wang 1982: 2/428). For a general survey of this and related 'occult' practices among Ming-Qing literati, see (Goyama 1994).

25 Cf. Tom Gunning's elegant analysis of spirit photography in (Gunning 1995).

the outlandish 'likeness' that flickered on the opaque surface of the mirror articulates a sense of a haunting, but also re-enchanted sense of visual reality. This sense of reality might have been what was driving the obsessively repetitive enactment of visual incongruity in seventeenth and eighteenth century portraits.

It was only later in the nineteenth century, among Shanghai portraitists, that a relatively stable face/rest ratio was adopted, with the consequence of opening up the possibility for painters to recognize disjunctive composition as sheer pictorial *convention* (figure 4). Thus in a painting by Ren Bonian, a man and his wife are posing in a room fitted with a crane pattern rug - symbol of longevity. The figure of the old man looms large over his wife's shoulder. But when we look more closely at the two faces, we come to realize that it is the wife's face that is rendered in its full physicality, in contrast to which the husband's face looks little more than a caricature - an impression all the more amplified by the comically fluffy and amorphous rendering of the man's jacket. By casting a potentially subversive pictorial content by means of the displacement of conventionalized sites of incongruity, the painter succeeded in weaving a light-hearted, but nonetheless biting message into his picture. As attractive as its irony may be, within the context of my discussion, such a case indicates the closure of an era: in late nineteenth century Shanghai, face/rest disjunction ceased to tacitly articulate the precarious relationship between painting and reality, or presence and representation, instead becoming available to painters as simply one of the multitudes of pictorial devices they could freely exploit in order to articulate the thematic contents of their pictures. Another regime of images sets in, but this is another story to tell.

Glossary

biyi 筆意

Bo Ya 伯牙

Chen Zao 陳造

daidi zhi jian, hechu ke rong ci shen. ran xing er bu xing, sheng er bu sheng, you fu chan er bu chan, lu er bu lu ye. ze hechu buke rong ci shen ye 大地之間，何處可容此身？然形而不形，聲而不聲，猶夫禪而不禪，律而不律也。則何處不可容此身耶？

Dong Bangda 董邦達

Hua Guan 華冠

Jiang Shaoshu 姜紹書

Jiezhou xuehua bian 芥舟學畫編

ji qi ji de yu xin, ruo feiniao zhi guomu, qi xing zhi qu wo yu ji, er shen yu quan yi 及其既得于心，若飛鳥之過目，其形之去我愈疾，而神愈全矣

ke hu zhi yu chu 可呼之欲出
lai 來
Liji 禮記
moshi 默識
Qiao Lai 喬萊
qing 情
Ren Bonian 任伯年
ru shenwu zhaowang, zhuan she hunpo 如神巫照亡，專攝魂魄
shen 神
Shen Shao 沈韶
Shen Zongqian 沈宗騫
si 思
Su Shi 蘇軾
tianran bifa 天然筆法
Wang Xuehao 王學浩
Wu Jiayun 吳嘉允
Wusheng shishi 無聲詩史
wusheng zhi yue 無聲之樂
Wu Xingzeng 吳省曾
xing 形
Xue Chengji 薛承基
Xu Zhang 徐璋
yincha 陰察
Yuan Mei 袁枚
Yushi heshang 語石和尚
Zeng Jing 曾鯨
zhaohun chuanshen 招魂傳神
zhiyin 知音
Zhong Ziqi 鐘子期

Illustrations

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Figure 1 Shen, Shao 沈韶. 1697 or before. *Portrait of the Chan Monk Yushi* 語石和尚像. Nanjing Museum 南京博物院. Source: *Ming Qing renwu xiaoxianghua xuan* 明清人物肖像畫選. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe 上海人民美術出版社, 1982, fig. 62.

Figure 2 Zeng, Jing 曾鯨. 1624. *Portrait of Zhao Geng* 趙？像. Guandong Municipal Museum 廣東省博物館. Source: *Mingjia Hanmo* 名家翰墨 vol. 41 (1993),

pp. 108-9.

Figure 3 Yu, Zhiding 禹之鼎. 1680-82 or 90-94? *Qiao Lai in His Study* 書畫？情圖. Nanjing Museum 南京博物院. Detail. Source: *Mingjia Hanmo* 名家翰墨 vol. 3 (1990), p. 118.

Figure 4 Ren, Bonian 任伯年. 1885. *Portrait of Grand Parents Mr and Mrs Zhao Dechang* 外祖趙德昌夫婦像. Chinese Museum of Art. Source: *Mingjia Hanmo* 名家翰墨 vol. 28 (1992), p. 46.

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